The Measurement of Face Pressure and its Role in Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

Numerous Chinese academics have asserted that face, defined as prestige that one holds or that is recognized by others through one's success or social position (Chan et al 2003), is vital to Chinese consumer's decision-making, but there has been little empirical evidence to support that position. As part of a cross cultural research program, we first develop a 6-item scale to measure face pressure. This scale is then used to measure the effect of face pressure on decision-making in both the US and China. As expected, face pressure does indeed prove to be a significant predictor of behavior intentions, both in the US and China. However, its role in the decision-making process is quite different in these two cultures. In China, face pressure stands on its own as an independent predictor of intentions, but in Western consumers its effects are mediated by the better known concept of subjective norms.

Keywords

Face, face pressure, decision – making, Theory of Reasoned Action, scale development, cross – cultural research

Introduction

A large part of consumer behavior research is focused on developing models for decision-making. These models are useful because they help us understand why people make the purchases they do, what they evaluate during the decision process and inform us of ways to communicate with consumers and use other marketing mix variables to influence and improve consumer choice. Models like the Theory of Reasoned Action (Azjen and Fishbein 1975, 1980) have all tried to explain the factors that we, as consumers, evaluate when making a decision. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TORA) claims that behavior intentions are based on the effects of attitudes and normative beliefs. This model has received extensive support from research in the US (Ajzen et al 2007), yet its cross – cultural validity has not been thoroughly explored. It remains to be seen whether this model is comprehensive enough to effectively model the decision – making process of consumers from eastern cultures such as China in which the role of the group may be particularly important.

Face

The concept of "face" is frequently discussed in the literature as an important and indeed critical variable affecting Chinese behavior. It has been described as "abstract and intangible…yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated (Chen 1990, p.131). It is pointed out further that "not to give a person face is the utmost height of rudeness and is like throwing down a gauntlet to him" (Chen 1990, p. 131). Yao et al (1987, p.48) suggests that losing face is "like a tree being stripped of its bark—a life and death situation." It is clear from these and many other quotes gleaned from the literature that face is vital to the Chinese.

Face refers to prestige that one holds or that is recognized by others through one's success or social position (Chan et al 2003). Two different Chinese words, *lien* and *mien tze,* comprise the more general concept of face. Lien refers to the confidence that society has in a person's moral character. We are all granted an amount at birth and cannot gain lien, but only lose it. For example, being caught stealing would result in a loss of lien, while a failure to make the Dean's List would result in a loss of mien tze. Mien tze is how society perceives a person's prestige gained through success and ostentation. Mien tze is not a birth right and can fluctuate up or down throughout ones' lifetime depending on how one conducts themselves during complex social interactions within certain social groups. It can only be given and taken away by others (Chan et al 1987).

Our actions not only affect our face, but also that of those close to us. Most significantly, our actions can affect our parent's face, but also our close family, ancestors, peer groups and other reference groups. For example, a student caught cheating would not just lose his or her own face but also the face of that student's parents. The student's behavior may also affect the face of the student body of the university he or she attends. An important implication of these effects of behavior on face is that, during decision-making, people would be very likely to consider the implications of their decisions, not just on themselves, but on all the constituencies who will feel the repercussions of their actions.

Unfortunately, little empirical work has been done to measure face or show its effect on consumer behavior and product related behavioral intentions. Extensive search of the literature revealed only two attempts to actually measure face and apply it to consumer decision-making and both of these used the same scale (Bao et al 2003 and Li and Su 2007). However, the creation of this scale did not match the generally accepted practices of developing a scale

(Churchill 1979, Shimp and Sharma 1987, Bearden et al 2001) and lacked the rigor necessary to instill confidence in using this scale across multiple contexts or studies. In the three studies presented in this paper, we follow Churchill's program for scale development and develop a 6-item scale to measure the importance of face pressure in consumer contexts. After developing this scale, we test its validity in both an American and a Chinese sample in studies 1 and 3.

Face pressure and Consumer Decision-Making

The theory of reasoned action is one of the more comprehensive and thoroughly researched models employed to explain consumers' decisions (e.g. condom use [Albarracin et al 2001, blood donation [Burnkrant and Page 1988], hearing aid use [Burnkrant et al 1991]). The model holds that behavior is a function of two types of variables – an attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm (i.e., the belief that most people important to the actor expect him or her to perform the behavior under consideration). The former variable is a function of beliefs about the consequences of performing the behavior and the evaluation of those consequences. The latter variable is a function of normative beliefs (i.e., beliefs about whether other people expect the person to perform the behavior) and the person's motivation to comply with those other people. As a general model of consumer behavior, the model holds that behavioral intention is determined by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm and the weights associated with each of those variables.

A major objective of this research is to determine whether face is already represented in the theory of reasoned action through the model's normative component or whether another normative variable is needed to account for face pressure. We define face pressure as the representation of repercussions of our actions on our face and the face of others important to us.

One might argue that face and face pressure are already reflected in the model through subjective norm or the weight associated with subjective norm. However, it may well be the case that face is not very well reflected in the model and that face pressure will comprise a separate and previously unrecognized component of the model.

It is expected that underlying this face pressure is a set of beliefs about the effects of behavior on the face of the actor and those important to the actor. We label these beliefs as face beliefs. Thus we are proposing the addition of a component to the theory of reasoned action to account for face related pressure. Just as beliefs about consequences underlie attitude toward behavior in the theory of reasoned action and normative beliefs underlie subjective norm, we are arguing that face beliefs underlie the variable we are identifying as face pressure. It is expected that, in accordance with the other components of the theory of reasoned action, a set of face related beliefs will underlie face pressure.

The first step in this research was to develop a set of face related beliefs that are structurally consistent with the theory of reasoned action and reflect the definition and understanding of the concept of face. Face is a subtle eastern concept with which many in America may not be familiar. Therefore, because we intended to conduct the research in both China and the US, we developed two versions of the face belief scale – one that employed the word "face" in the wording of the belief statements to be used with a Chinese sample, and an equivalent scale that did not use the word "face" but used other equivalent words to provide the same meaning. We then empirically tested the substitutability of the two versions of the scale and conducted two studies (one in the US and one in China) using the alternative versions of the scale along with normative beliefs, motivation to comply, subjective norm and behavioral intentions to answer the major research question guiding this research.

Preliminary Research (Focus Groups)

We began our research by gathering a sample of native Asians (2 males, 3 females) well-versed in the concept of face for our focus groups. This sample consisted of native Asians who had spent the majority of their lives in the east. However, all of them had spent the last one to five years living in the US. Two were married, one was engaged and two were single, and they ranged in age from 25 – 31 years old. All of them were currently pursuing graduate degrees and had already obtained bachelor's degrees from Asian institutions. In order to avoid "groupthink" and allow each person to have enough opportunity to share his or her opinions, we split this sample into two focus groups.

Over a period of 60 – 90 minutes, these subjects were asked to define face in their own words and give examples of situations in which face is influential. They were also asked questions regarding who their decisions influence the relation of face to consumption and about the many facets of face. Though they were asked these questions, subjects were never asked to stay on point or cut short, allowing for a comfortable and free flowing form of discussion regarding face. Often subjects would begin discussing certain situations between themselves without regard to the experimenter in the room, indicating the naturalness and lack of self-presentation in the answers.

Both focus groups showed consistency in their definition and descriptions of the role of face in consumption. These groups indicated that face is not important in all consumer decisions, but primarily those that were public and involving. They also regularly discussed the difference between gaining and avoiding losing face and the fact that both of these drive beliefs of the effect of face on decisions. Finally, they also stressed the importance of understanding the

effect that consumer decisions had, not just on their own character, but on the character of their parents and important others in their lives. From their answers, a 6 – item scale was developed to measure face pressure in a consumer context. Since face pressure is not a general concept like need for cognition but critically tied to a specific behavior context like attitude toward behavior, the scale questions were used in the context of an upcoming wedding party. From discussions with the focus groups, this situation was universally considered one in which, given its public and involving nature, a purchase decision would be heavily influenced by face pressure. Our scale, following the input of our focus groups, also includes statements that focus on both gaining and avoiding loss of face and the effect of these decisions on important others. Prior to using the scale, it was reviewed by the focus group sample and slightly adjusted based on their feedback. Exhibit 1 describes the 6-item scale measuring the effect of face pressure in the specific context under consideration in this research.

Exhibit 1

> Imagine the following situation: Your cousin's wedding is coming up very soon. To celebrate, it was decided that there would be a large wedding party to which your parents would be invited, as well as yourself and other close family members and friends. This party is fast approaching and you are considering what you will wear to this occasion. It is a formal affair and therefore, you decide on a suit / dress.

Face Scale:

1. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will cause me to gain face
2. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will cause my parents to gain face

3. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will cause those who are important to me to gain face
4. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will keep me from losing face
5. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will keep my parents from losing face
6. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will keep those who are important to me from losing face

All belief statements were rated on seven point scales varying from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Study 1 – The role of face in decision – making for Chinese consumers

To provide initial support for the reliability and validity of the scale, we gathered a sample of English speaking students from a major Chinese university. Our goals in this stage of research were: first, to test the reliability and validity of the scale; second, to empirically verify the important influence of face pressure on behavioral intentions; and third, to understand its possible relationship to normative beliefs and subjective norm.

We distributed our survey to a sample of 362 Chinese students that spoke English as a second language. In our survey we included our six-item face pressure scale, and additional items measuring subjective norm, normative beliefs, motivation to comply and behavioral intention. Two related more general face-related scales were incorporated into the questionnaire. They were Bao et al's face scale and the status scale developed by Eastman (1995). Finally, we measured 12 factors (face beliefs) that we believed, through the literature and preliminary research, underlie face pressure. There were three behavior intention questions: two 7 – point scales anchored with Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree or Extremely Likely and Extremely

Unlikely related to the statement, 'I will wear a new suit / dress for the party' and a 7 – point scale anchored with Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree related to the statement, 'I will buy a new suit / dress for the party.'

Since our context was public and of high involvement, we believe that face pressure will be a strong predictor of behavior intentions. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H_1: In Chinese consumers, face pressure will be a significant predictor of behavior intentions

All evidence in the literature and from our focus groups indicates that face pressure is a concept in Chinese culture quite distinct from subjective norms. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H_2: In Chinese consumers, face pressure will be significant and independent of subjective norms when predicting behavior intentions

Analyses

A Factor analyses with a varimax rotation was conducted across all the survey items. This factor analysis revealed that all six face pressure measures loaded on one factor and this factor was separate from any others underlying the overall survey structure (all factor loadings >.594). Further analysis of our face pressure scale revealed that we indeed had created a reliable scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .872). Based on the support for uni-dimensionality and reliability of the face pressure items, a face pressure scale was generated by summing the six items described above.

Similarly, the three behavioral intention questions were extracted as their own factor (all loadings >.766). These were summed and used as the dependent measure in the analyses (Cronbach's Alpha = .859).

Evidence of convergent and discriminant validity is provided by comparisons of the correlations between the face pressure scale and other variables shown in Exhibit 2. Convergent validity is shown by the fact that face pressure correlated more highly with a second scale designed to measure underlying face related beliefs (i.e., face beliefs) (Cronbach's Alpha = .882) than it did with any other scale (r=0.573). Support for the convergent validity of the normative variables (i.e., NBMC and subjective norm) is shown by the fact that NBMC correlates more highly with subjective norm than it does with any other variable (r=0.470). Evidence of discriminant validity is provided by the fact that the correlation between face pressure and either NBMC (r=0.378) or subjective norm (r=0.398) is lower than the correlation between face pressure and face beliefs (r=0.573). Please note that it is to be expected that positive correlations will exist between the NBMC and subjective norm on the one hand and face pressure on the other because both concepts are related to social groups and norms. However, the key for purposes of the assessment of the discriminant validity of face pressure is that the correlation between face pressure and these more traditional normative variables is lower than the correlation between the two face related belief measures. Finally, it may be noted the Bao face scale, a very general and non-comparable global measure of face, also correlated significantly with face pressure (r=0.261).

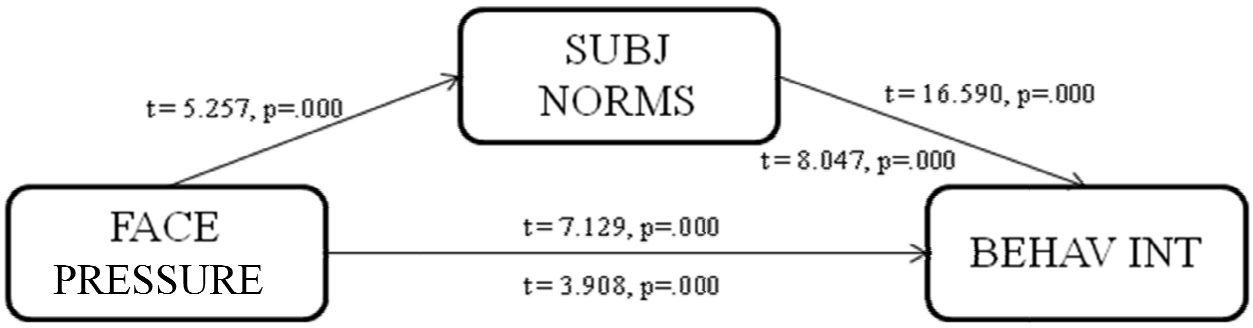
Exhibit 2

	Subj. norms	NBMC	Face pressure	Face beliefs	Bao face scale	Status scale	Behav Int
Subj. norms	1.000						
NBMC	.470*	1.000					
Face pressure	.398*	.378*	1.000				
Face beliefs	.374*	.312*	.573*	1.000			
Bao face scale	.047	.084	.261*	.272*	1.000		
Status scale	.099	.093	.193*	.359*	.588*	1.000	
Behav Int	.477*	.377*	.357*	.423*	.102	.173*	1.000

*Correlation is significant at the .001 level

It was shown through regression analysis that the subjective norm measure is a significant predictor of behavioral intentions (t = 16.590, p = .000). A separate analysis showed that face pressure is also a significant predictor of behavioral intentions (t = 7.129, p =.000) while a regression including both face pressure and subjective norms showed that both subjective norms (t = 8.047, p =.000) and face pressure (t =3.908, p =.000) remained significant predictors (see Exhibit 3) of behavioral intention. These regressions provide strong supporting evidence that face pressure contribute to the prediction of Chinese consumer behavior over and above the contribution of subjective norm. These results provide the first empirical confirmation of our prediction that face pressure will act as a separate predictor of Chinese consumer behavior and account for that behavior even when the effect of subjective norm is taken into consideration.

Exhibit 3



Study 2 – Defining face for an English audience

Study 1 provided us with evidence of two points: the 6 – item scale developed in the preliminary focus group was indeed a reliable and valid scale. It also showed that face pressure contributed to the prediction of Chinese consumer behavior even in the presence of subjective norm – the variable that according to the Theory of Reasoned Action accounted for all normative pressure. The next step in our research was to ascertain the role that face might be playing in a western culture. Was it something that was missing from all decision-making models? Or was there good reason why the field had never uncovered this concept while developing its models? To do this, a similar study needed to be run on a sample of Americans.

However, before doing this, an important issue would be to use language that American students could understand. While the concept of face was ubiquitous in China, it was novel and, very likely did not carry nearly the same amount of depth and subtlety of meaning in English. Therefore, what was needed was an appropriate translation of the word face into English. Searching the literature and using the definitions provided by the focus groups, a phrase was developed that would be substituted into the scale used in Study 1. This substitution was validated both qualitatively and empirically. First, the phrase was shown to the focus groups to

ask their perception of its accuracy in describing face. Over discussion with this group, our initial wording was slightly altered and revised version was developed. Exhibit 4 shows each of the six items with their altered language.

Exhibit 4

1. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will reflect positively upon my character
2. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will reflect positively upon my parents character
3. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will reflect positively upon the character of those who are important to me
4. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will prevent others from forming a negative opinion of my character.
5. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will keep prevent others from forming a negative opinion of my parent's character
6. My wearing a new suit / dress to the party will prevent others from forming a negative opinion of the character of people who are important to me

A survey was created, using the same consumption scenario as study 1, in which both face pressure scales were included. This survey was distributed to a sample of undergraduate Chinese students from a Chinese university (n = 289). In this survey the three key items being measured were the original face pressure scale used in study 1 (called the original scale), the

revised scale with new language (called the revised scale) and the behavior intention measures. We hypothesize that

> *H_3: The two face pressure scales will be significantly correlated and display a similar pattern of convergent validity*

Analyses

Results support our belief that these two scales are functionally equivalent and interchangeable. The original scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .819) and the revised scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .779) displayed reliability consistent with that in study 1. As was done in study 1, the measures in both these scales were summed to create 2 different overall measures of face. Evidence of convergent validity is provided by the fact that the correlation between the two face pressure scales was significant (r = .412, p = .001) and substantially higher than the correlation between either face pressure scale and subjective norm. The correlations involving subjective norm were (original face scale: r = .231, p = .000, revised face scale: r = .191, p = .000) (see exhibit 5).

The evidence from this study shows that our revised face pressure scale is an appropriate substitute for our original face pressure scale. It maintains its reliability and is significantly correlated with the original scale.

Exhibit 5

	Original Face Pressure Scale	Revised Face Pressure Scale	Subj. Norms	Behav. Intentions
Original Scale	1.000			
Revised Scale	.412*	1.000		
Subj. Norms	.231*	.191*	1.000	
Behav. Intentions	.409*	.294*	.445*	1.000

*Correlation is significant at the .001 level

Study 3 – The role of face in decision – making for US consumers

Now that an appropriate scale has been developed to measure face pressure in an American culture, we can measure the influence that face pressure has on decision – making in a consumer context in western culture. For this study, a sample of students from a Midwestern university was used (n = 107). The survey administered to this sample was identical to the one administered to the Chinese sample in study 1 except that the word face was replaced with the semantically consistent phrase from study 2. The face consumption literature clearly positions face as a uniquely eastern concept. It is closely related to our conceptualization of subjective norms and, therefore, should be predictive of intentions. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H_4: In American consumers, face pressure will be a significant predictor of behavior intentions

However, western culture has always focused more on individuality and that our actions are a reflection of ourselves. Face pressure, however, also stresses the important role that our actions can have on the characterization of important others. Therefore we hypothesize that

H_5: In American consumers, face pressure will NOT be a significant and independent predictor of subjective norms when predicting behavior intentions

Analyses

Results from this study highlight both similarities and differences between Chinese and American consumers. A factor analysis across all items with varimax rotation revealed that all six face pressure measures (loadings all > .555) and the three intentions measures (loadings all >.806) loaded on single and separate factors. Again, our scale shows impressive reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = .937) and, based on this support for uni-dimensionality and reliability of the face items, as well as its consistency with previous procedures, a face pressure scale was generated by summing the six items described above. Similarly, the three behavioral intention questions were summed and used as the dependent measure in the analyses (Cronbach's Alpha = .923).

Evidence of convergent and discriminant validity is again supported in a manner similar to the Chinese survey. Evidence of convergent validity is provided by the fact that the two measures of face (i.e., face pressure and face beliefs [Cronbach's Alpha = .938]) correlate more highly (r=0.753) with each other than with any other variable in the survey. Again, the convergent validity of NBMC and subjective norm was supported by the high correlation between these two variables (r=0.689). Evidence of discriminant validity is shown by the correlation between the lower correlations between each of the face measures (i.e., face pressure and face beliefs) on the one hand and subjective norm and normative beliefs on the other. The correlations involving subjective norm are 0.477 and 0.316 for face pressure and face beliefs, respectively. Correlations involving NBMC are 0.547 and 0.408 for face pressure and face

beliefs, respectively. Again the Bao face scale correlated with each of the face scales and the correlation was higher between those scales than it was between the Bao face scale and any other variable in the survey. The inter-correlation matrix can be seen in exhibit 6.

Exhibit 6

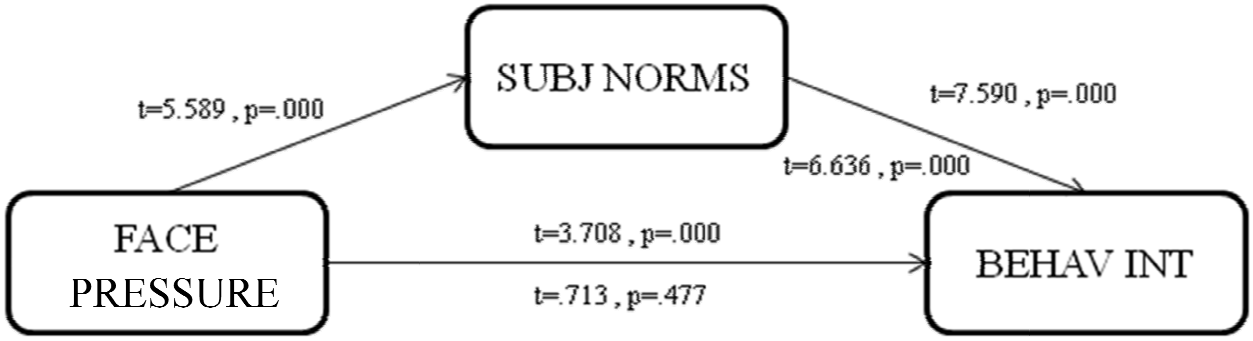
	Subj. norms	NBMC	Face pressure	Face beliefs	Bao face scale	Status scale	Behav Int
Subj. norms	1.000						
NBMC	.689*	1.000					
Face pressure	.477*	.547*	1.000				
Face beliefs	.316*	.408*	.753*	1.000			
Bao face scale	.211**	.294*	.428*	.472*	1.000		
Status scale	.262*	.366*	.517*	.608*	.715*	1.000	
Behav Int	.613*	.642*	.340*	.327*	.224**	.318*	1.000

*Correlation is significant at the .01 level **Correlation is significant at the .05 level

It was shown through regression analysis that subjective norms were a significant predictor of behavioral intentions (t=7.590, p =.000). A separate analysis showed that face pressure is also a significant predictor of behavioral intentions (t = 3.708, p =.000) while a regression including both face pressure and subjective norms showed that subjective norms remained significant (t = 6.636, p =.000) while face pressure was no longer significant (t = .713, p =.477). Finally, a regression analysis showed that face pressure was a significant predictor of subjective norm (t = 5.589, p =.000). These regression analyses indicate that although face pressure is a significant predictor of behavioral intention, the effect is mediated by subjective

norms (see exhibit 7). Comparing the results of studies 1 and 3 shows the different role that face plays in two distinct cultures.

Exhibit 7



General Discussion

This research is the first to develop a measure of face pressure tied to a face consumption scenario. It has developed a parsimonious scale from which the importance of face pressure in the decision – making process can be discerned. Also, it has been shown that face pressure is a concept that, currently unmeasured in decision models, needs to be included when applying these models to Asian societies as they play a separate and independent role from norms for Chinese consumers.

Future research should incorporate face pressure into the TORA model in both contexts where face pressure are likely to drive decision – making and those when it is not. This will allow us to more thoroughly test the validity of face as a third factor in the model. With the growth of Asian economies, face, a backbone of these societies, has now become a construct that

marketers can no longer ignore and must now understand to improve their communication with potential customers.

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